

First, thank you to the organizers of the Helsinki Commission to organize today's briefings and especially also to Senator Sam Brownback, Ron McNamara and others, and thank you very much for your initiative to contact the Austrian Embassy at the present for half a year chairing, so to say, the presidency of the European Union.

I thought that my place in this context would maybe be best to refer to you or to report to you what the overall policy of the European Union versus Belarus is. And, actually, just this Monday, beginning of this week, Belarus was on the agenda of the European Union's Council for External Relations. And it was on the agenda there, and all the ministers adopted conclusions, so to say, a commonly agreed position with regard to the topic. So I would like to give you a read out, so to say, of these conclusions so you have the broader picture where the European Union aims to go.

In the conclusions of this Monday, the council especially referred to its conclusion of November 7. Those conclusions were very comprehensive and were reiterated on Monday, so I will start out to outline those conclusions of last November 7 when the council expressed its deep concern at the deteriorating situation of human rights and political freedoms in Belarus, in particular the harassment of political parties, independent media, NGOs and the reluctance to conduct independent investigations into disappearances of prominent opponents of President Lukashenko.

The council noted the importance of the presidential elections for 2006 and in particular called on the Belarusian government to reverse the current deteriorating trend in respect of democracy and human rights to ensure that the electoral process is conducted in a free and fair manner in accordance with international standards and to abide by its commitments in the OSCE and the UN.

The council in November also called on the Belarusian government to issue an early invitation to a full OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission and to allow it to operate unimpeded. And it noted the willingness of E.U. member states to contribute to that mission.

It also called on the Belarusian government to ensure that all eligible candidates are allowed to register for the election, to campaign freely and to enjoy equal access to state-controlled media.

It also referred to the parliamentary elections of October 17, 2004 and the referendum in Belarus which were not conducted in a free and fair manner. And the council recalled its lack of confidence that the results truly reflected the will of the Belarusian people of these elections.

The council noted the view of the council of Europe's Venice Commission that the referendum was unlawful. It expressed its concern that the 2006 presidential elections should be conducted

on a legal and democratic basis, and the council therefore called on the Belarusian government to fully implement the recommendation of the respective reports of the OSCE/ODIHR in time for the presidential elections in 2006.

The council also confirmed its determination to intensify the E.U. support for democracy and human rights in Belarus. In this context, the council encouraged the E.U.'s political parties to strengthen links with their counterpart in Belarus and welcome the selection of a united opposition candidate.

The council confirmed its willingness to continue to work through a range of channels to support Belarusian civil society. It welcomes the commission's significant allocation for support for independent media in Belarus and its commitment to designate Belarus a priority country for the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights and decentralize corporation instruments in 2005-2006.

On support for independent media, in particular, the council requested the commission to consider taking further action. The council also stressed the importance of a flexible use of existing instruments and of the European neighborhood partnership instrument serving as a more flexible source for funding, for building and promoting democracy from 2007 to 2013, the next financial framework of the European Union.

The council underlined the willingness of member states and the institutions of the E.U. to promote shared democratic values between the people of the E.U. and Belarus by intensifying people-to-people contacts, meaning through students, scientific exchanges, scholarships, youth travel, contact between small- and medium-sized enterprises, training local authority officials, et cetera.

In seeking to convey its positions clearly to the Belarusian authorities and maximize the impact of its policies, the council reaffirmed its policy on limited ministerial contact but highlighted its willingness to engage with Belarusian officials. It welcomed the decision of the secretary general/high representative to nominate for his part a point of contact under his authority in Belarus and his decision to send his personal representative for human rights to Belarus before the end of the year to engage with civil society and to express E.U. concerns to President Lukashenko's government.

The council welcomed the commission's decision to open a regionalized delegation in Minsk by the end of the year, and it stated its willingness to maintain and intensify engagement cooperation and coordination with international partners in order to promote democratization in Belarus.

The council will continue to monitor the situation in Belarus closely and will revert to it in January 2006. It also underlined its concern at the harassment of civil society organizations, including the Union of Poles of Belarus. Council stated its readiness to take further appropriate restrictive measures against the responsible individuals in the event of failure to uphold international standards, in particular commitments made in the OSCE context.

While the council took up, as here, expressed in November 2007, the topic of Belarus this Monday and adopted shorter conclusions because they expressively referred to the conclusions I was just outlining to you, I just want to highlight here what has been added or more emphasized this Monday was that the council again called on the Belarusian authorities to ensure that the presidential elections on March 19 are conducted in a free and fair manner in accordance with international standards and in line with Belarus' commitment in the OSCE and the UN.

In this context, the council welcomed the invitation by the Belarusian authorities to the OSCE or the election observation mission and noted the willingness of the member states to make timely and adequate contributions to such a mission. In that respect, the council urges the responsible Belarusian authorities to allow the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission to operate unimpeded in Belarus to ensure that all eligible candidates are allowed to register for the election, campaign freely and to enjoy equal access to state-controlled media, to allow domestic and international media to report freely on the electoral process, to fully implement the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR report on the 17 of October, 2004 parliamentary elections in time for the presidential elections of 2006.

And the council is continuing closely to monitor the situation in Belarus and has restated its readiness to take further appropriate restrictive measures against the responsible individuals in the even of failure to uphold international standards in the electoral process, in particular those of the OSCE.

The council reiterated its support for initiatives aimed at supported democratization in civil society in Belarus and encourages the intensification and facilitation of contacts between the people of the E.U. and Belarus. And it recalls that the E.U. wishes to have closer and better relations with Belarus, including within the framework of the partnership and cooperation agreements and the European neighborhood policy, once the Belarusian authorities clearly demonstrate their willingness to respect democratic values, human rights and the rule of law.

I wanted to outline this to you and maybe add that often in the framework of E.U.-U.S. cooperation there is a cooperation in the context of democracy promotion. This was a topic agreed at the last E.U.-U.S. summit here in the United States and there is a constant dialogue between the E.U. and U.S. with regard to concrete, joint measures and actions that can be taken. Thank you very much.